

Article

# You Made *El Team-O!* The Transnational Browning of the National Basketball Association through the “Noche Latina” Marketing Campaigns

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## Abstract

This essay pushes beyond the black-white binary in an effort to expand understandings into the relationship between sport, Latinidad, and global capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a discursive analysis into the National Basketball Association (NBA) outreach policies, I ask: do recent shifts in the NBA’s marketing strategies, while alluding towards social inclusion and multicultural diversity, also contribute to the containment, exclusion, and marginalization to the fastest growing minority group in the United States: the Latina/o. By conducting a textual analysis into the NBA’s Noche Latina campaign, this essay makes the case that while the NBA may be another example of *browning the sporting gaze* the gaze remains fixed upon Western capitalist notions of identity and representation. An aim of this study seeks to highlight the contradictions within U.S. based-sport marketing in hopes that sport fans, pundits and academics alike might grapple with and strive towards understanding how phenomena like “Noche Latina” repackages racialized, sexist and cultural tropes for global television audiences and social media users alike.

## Keywords

Latina/o sport; NBA; Noche Latina; Latinidad; transnationalism; marketing

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

This essay provides a critical examination into the recent growth and global development of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in relation to Latin Americans and U.S.-based Latina/o Hispanic populations. By conducting a textual analysis into the NBA’s Noche Latina campaign, this essay makes the case that while the NBA may be *browning the sporting gaze* the gaze remains centered upon Eurocentric notions of identity and cultural representation. Through a discursive analysis into the NBA’s contemporary marketing and branding strategies, I demonstrate how these recent shifts in NBA policy, while mobilizing notions of social inclusion and multiculturalism, in actuality contributes

to the erasure, marginalization and political containment to the fastest growing minority group in the United States: the Latina/o.

The author attempts to push beyond the Black-White racial binary in an effort to further expand popular cultural understandings into the relationship between sport and Latinidad by offering a multidisciplinary intersectional reading into gender, sexuality, ethnorace, citizenship and political economy. Consequently, this essay asks: under what political-cultural-social-economic matrixes does Noche Latina participate in; how does Noche Latina—as spectacle, branding, and transnational commodity—further re-inscribe racialized, sexualized and cultural Latina/o tropes? Ultimately, I am curious in raising the inquiry: what are

the implications of adopting a neoliberal multicultural-sporting framework in creating, circulating and consuming the Latina/o sporting body with/in contemporary American immigrant and “browning” discourses? The aim of this study is to highlight the contradictions within the NBA in order to grapple and strive towards critical diversity and social inclusion.

The literature this essay reviews is broken into two parts. The first section works through the transformations in global economy and US domestic politics overseeing the emergence of sport as transnational entity. In this section, I review the literature deriving from Sport Studies in relation to the NBA and networks of global capitalism. I explain how recent shifts in the political economic agenda of the NBA has necessitated campaigns that complicate the role of the nation-State and local communities. The second part discusses the “Hispanicization” of America borrowing from Latina/o Cultural Studies. I provide a brief overview into some of the critical studies regarding the marketing of “Hispanic” and the commodification of US Latinas/os in order to theorize as to how the NBA’s Noche Latina operates within the frameworks of ethnoraciality, global capitalism, and transnational media. The Discussion portion of the essay argues Noche Latina proves to be a fruitful site to critically assess whether the Noche Latina campaigns currently serves as a policy worthy to be considered as socially inclusive. For the purposes of this study, this final section is broken into three specific moments whereby the aforementioned frameworks of sport as global commodity and Latinidad are applied. This paper concludes the Noche Latina phenomena must be perceived and understood as a sporting tool that simultaneously represents, regulates and re-imagines the browned body in U.S. popular and sporting discourses. The author concludes by offering alternative resolutions the NBA might consider in order to further improve its outreach efforts for Latina/o US Hispanic peoples. Overall, the adoption and usage of browning and/or brownness in this paper is done in an effort to illustrate the complexities of ethno-racialization, nationality, citizenship and power hierarchies. As such, the essay adopts a multidisciplinary, intersectional framework in order to further illustrate topics of importance related to the cultural politics of race and culture in sport and society.

## 2. Literature Review

Although there has been a recent growth amongst both academic and popular circles towards researching the growing influence of Hispanic marketing within the National Basketball Association (Jensen, 2014; Harrison & Mukul, 2013) this essay differs by grappling with social theory as its source of engagement. In other words, this paper does not attempt to offer a comprehensive overview to the origins and development of Noche La-

tina as it has been adopted by each single basketball organization, player and/or NBA season; rather, I have organized this study to focus on the more prominent cultural-political-economic-social contexts by which the promotion and dissemination of Noche Latina, across physical and cyber platforms, have undergone since its implementation in the 2006–07 NBA season. Henceforth, the bulk of my data derives from popular culture, social media and online blogs. Ultimately, the author is invested in illustrating how events like Noche Latina act and serves as conduits by which the re-definition of American citizenship is taking place across 21<sup>st</sup> century global sporting worlds.

### 2.1. Transnational Projects: Sport as a Global Economic Phenomenon

Early 2014, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, David Stern officially stepped down from his post as Commissioner of the National Basketball Association. His retirement came exactly three decades to the day from taking on the job. According to an article published by the *Washington Post Newsweek Interactive*, Stern arose at a time when the “league was a wasteland plagued by bankrupt teams and drug scandals... When Stern, the son of a delicatessen owner, suggested that basketball could one day rival soccer as the world’s most popular sport, his critics thought he must’ve been as high as all too many NBA players at the time” (Larmer, 2005, p. 71). Larmer alludes to one of the greatest shifts that will outlast Stern’s retirement in the sporting world: the NBA as a global economic phenomenon.

In his opening essay to *The Commercialisation of Sport*, seminal sport scholar and cultural critic David L. Andrews challenges sport fans, journalists and scholars alike to move beyond the mantra of “it’s just a game”. Andrews (2004) challenges us to re-connect American sport to the larger nexus of power: the political economy of the sports-media-cultural complex. By situating the consumption, performativity, spectacle and institutionalization of sport within “context of contemporary US political economy” Andrews argues:

[T]he explosion of sporting content on network and cable television, radio, in newspapers, magazines and on the Internet has transformed sport into an intrusive and influential cultural practice; one that profoundly contributes to the shaping of everyday understandings, identities and experiences, as it swells the coffers of the wider economy. (p. 4)

According to Andrews, to dismiss the captivating routines practices between sport and media today would be like dismissing the role of the Church in the Middle Ages. Andrews articulates the affects that the dominant cultural-political-economic-social paradigm has for the global consumption of professional sport. Trac-

ing television networks such as ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC, Andrews (2004) highlights that the contemporary transnational capitalist edifice has “virtually erased [the] boundaries between advertiser and programmer interests” (p. 8). As a case-study, Andrews (2004) points out that in 1998 FOX owner Rupert Murdoch purchased the Los Angeles Dodgers only slightly above \$300 U.S. million. This highlights the lucrative potential and capitalist incentives imagined across sporting and global marketing firms. Consequently, branding culture becomes of immense importance for the social inclusion of marginalized sectors into dominant society.

Branding, as explained by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) is “now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations [whereby] brands become the setting around which individuals weave their own stories, where individuals position themselves as the central character in the narrative of the brand” (p. 4). Consequently, sport offers ample opportunities by which branding culture can/does take place. For example, when FOX News Corporation bought the Dodgers almost two decades ago, in many ways the media conglomerate was also claiming ownership to the means by which the sporting organization, its contracted athletes, and fans would/have become branded. Additionally, one can see the power of media in shaping contemporary sporting practices with the case of the Turner Broadcasting System, who in 1976 bought the Major League Baseball Atlanta Braves franchise, effectively merging branding and consumption thru sport. Indeed, the practice of branding people through sport remains a contested terrain, especially in relation to Native American and politics of sovereignty, identity and cultural representation (King, 2001). Conclusively, branding will remain an important 21<sup>st</sup> century socio-cultural tool for power holders in the sport-industrial complex due to the prevalent synergy between media and marketing across national boundaries.

Indeed, the National Basketball Association has developed to become a formidable global sport for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, guided by the logic of neoliberalism—free trade, open markets, government deregulation, individualism—the NBA, like any other transnational enterprise in the late capitalist period, is invested in growing its fan base across a myriad of peoples, cultures and spaces. In fact, the dominance of NBA branding efforts can be traced to the phenomenon of Michael Jordan, a moment in sporting history when corporations like Nike and Gatorade linked to the ethos of “Be like Mike”, effectively reigned in the common-day paradox where branding further creates branding (Kellner, 2001). As a \$5 billion dollar industry, the NBA has extended its “sphere of influence” across the globe in China, Europe, Africa and South America. According to Larmer (2005), the NBA would not have retrieved such a high-status global position of power if it were not for David Stern’s leadership and global en-

vision. “The NBA, they said, was too alien, too menacing, too ‘black’ to sell to the mainstream American public, much less to do the rest of the world. But Stern envisioned a game that defied the boundaries of race and culture and geography just as easily as its acrobatic players defied the limits of gravity” (p. 71). Stern’s vision for a NBA palatable for global consumption—across differences, not despite them—seems to have coincided immensely with the emergence of the “browning of America”. The following two sections seek to demonstrate how the NBA of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has mobilized new ways to appeal to newer audiences by establishing new markets and therefore increasing its transnational affluence. I illustrate below that multiculturalist incentives towards social inclusivity via the NBA Spanish-marketing campaigns remain dictated by Eurocentric notions of identity, culture, and representation.

#### 2.1.1. Origins: Hispanic Heritage Month

The term “Hispanic” was first introduced to public-imaginaries in a *New York Times* 1969 article. Indeed, through a concerted institutional effort at appropriating the late-1960’s politically charged social movements of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, the United States government effectively undermined and substituted the self-determination and cultural nationalism with a centrist politics of branding ubiquitously known as multiculturalism. Suzanne Oboler (1995) reflects on the historical origins of the term Hispanic and ponders:

Why, one cannot help but ask, in this period of national emergence of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans and in view of their specific divergent demands and cultural affirmation as *two distinct groups*, would the president of the United States designate a “Hispanic Heritage” week? (p. 81)

Oboler sheds light on these historical complexities and the political contradictions that the term “Hispanic” has invoked since 1969. Ultimately, she critiques the belief that a U.S. institutionally led approach, guided by a White majority, can ultimately bridge the cultural and political wealth-gap thriving in American society today. More importantly, Oboler (1995) argues against State-led initiatives because they failed time again to recognize the “largely mestizo, indigenous, and/or black populations that make up the majority of the Central American nations...nor of the indigenous and mestizo cultural roots that both the Chicanos and the Puerto Ricans emphasized in their movements” (p. 82). Additionally, the term “Hispanic” has been cited as limiting formal connections to processes of modern-day colonialism because it de-nationalizes group history and de-links group interest via associating with Spanish Empire while simultaneously hiding the influence of U.S. Em-

pire for Latin America and U.S. “Hispanics” alike (Alcoff, 2005). In short, discourses around this Hispanic identity have inherently contained, erased and silenced (non-European) cultures, populations and transnational voices.

### 2.1.2. Development: The Age of the Hispanic and Commodification

Somewhere in between the social movements of the 1960s and the neoliberal backlash into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, race and racism became a non-issue in the U.S., done away with by Civil Rights legislation and the non-violent movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their co-authored article, Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2012) re-articulate the notion of colorblind racism within the context of the election and presidency of Barack Obama:

For older generations of blacks desperate to see racial equality before they die, and for many post-Reagan generation blacks and minorities who have seen very little racial progress in their lifetimes, Obama became the new messiah of the civil rights movements. In contrast, the symbolic meaning of Obama to whites was compatible with their belief that America was indeed a color-blind nation. (p. 198)

Colorblind racism, in brief, is the new racist regime “used to explain, rationalize, and defend white racial interests” (p. 192). The new racist system also naturalizes a “false consciousness” among people of color, whereby U.S. minorities fall back on the “old bootstraps story” in rationalizing issues of systematic inequality and inadequate resource distribution. Unfortunately, through this insurgency of racial neutrality, critical concepts such as racialization—the notion that society is inherently fractured along racial hierarchies and codes superimposed by governing structures—have been considered unnecessary when discussing the placement of Latinas/os within the racial spectrum.

Arlene Dávila (2008) resuscitates the concept of racialization in order to illustrate the highly charged realities Latinas/os represent and undergo within US mainstream discourses today. “Illegal, tax burden, patriotic, family-oriented, hard-working, and model consumer—how do we make sense of such contrasting definitions of Latinos? Why do they circulate in concert? Put simply, everyone seems to want an answer to the same questions: Are Latinos friends or foes?” (p. 1). And indeed, it is within this context that mainstream media representations of Latinas/os in the United States have occurred in the past decades. One of the premises by which *this browning* is taking place is in the hyper-visibility and/or representation of Brownness through media platforms, largely operative within enclave and ethnic-marketing. In Jackson, Andrews, and Scherer

(2005), sport is construed as a “global cultural form, practice and institution has not been immune from advertising’s cultural excavation and exploitation” (p. 5). As such, this final sub-section provides a brief overview to the intersections between racialization, Latinidad and the concept of ethnorace in order to contextualize the rise of Noche Latina as very much informing and guiding media creations and circulations about Latinidad in specific, and browned bodies in general.

In her important book Chicana historian Martha Menchaca (2002) adopts Omi and Winant’s *racial formation theory* and describes how the historical process of racialization intertwines with those deemed Latinas/os today. According to Menchaca (2002), “the reproduction of racial inequality was instituted through a legal process [called] racialization. Spain and the United States used their legal systems to confer social and economic privileges upon Whites and to discriminate against people of color” (p. 5). In other words, the placement and justification for a racially stratified social structure has its roots within the colonial endeavors of Spain first, then the United States (see Alcoff, 2005). The regulation, containment, erasure, and forced assimilation of Afro-Indigenous culture and people were executed through the state, Church and a myriad of other institutions (military, education, law, etc.). Fortunately, much work being produced within Latina/o Studies provides ample lenses and frameworks by which to better understand the intersections between racialization and the U.S. media’s construction of Latinas/os.

For example, Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2010) maps out the “symbolic value assigned to Latinas in a media landscape that remains simultaneously familiar and strangely new” (p. 1). Inquiring about the desire and commodification of Latinas, she asks: “Under what representational conditions are Latinas depicted as socially acceptable, culturally dangerous, or politically transformative to specific audiences? What are the limits, possibilities, and consequences of Latinas’ contemporary global marketability?” (2010, p. 3). *Dangerous curves’* examination into processes of racialization is different from Menchaca and other racial theorists due to its focus on popular culture, namely media representation of Latinidad in the U.S. In a previous work, co-authored with Angharad N. Valdivia, Molina-Guzmán articulates Latinidad as epitomizing the present-day synergy that connects transnational communities within the larger symbolic processes and representations of globalization. Accordingly, Latinidad is a:

[S]ocial construct informed by the mediated circulation of ethnic-specific community discourses and practices as well as mainstream economic and political imperatives through the cultural mainstream. Thus Latinidad is a category constructed from the outside with marketing and political homogenizing



implications as well as from within with assertions to difference and specificity. (Molina-Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 208)

Within this particular moment, where race and global media intersect, Molina-Guzmán, like Dávila, provide us with the context and tools to better grasp the role of Hispanic marketing with/in the NBA.

Additionally, Dávila (2001) examines the Hispanic marketing industry and demonstrates how it both defines, and is determined by, Latinos. She shows that Hispanic marketing, “as a self-identified arena of Latino self-representation” remains largely “dominated by corporate intellectuals of Latin American background in the United States [with direct] ties to the structures of the U.S. economy” (p. 2). Dávila’s analysis is a salient foundation by which this study explores the dialectical relationships between Latinos, advertisement, and sport. According to Dávila, advertisements are “complex texts that, as stereotypical or outlandish as they may be, are always entangled with the interests, desires, or imaginations of those whom they seek to entice as consumers, and are always the result of negotiations in the process of depicting the consumer” (pp. 14-15). The expansion of Hispanic marketing, as a defining cultural industry in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, really demonstrates how difference along the color line has been one of corporate absorption. Thus, Noche Latina, and the browning of the sporting gaze in general, are operative in “a context where nothing escapes commodification [and instead] must be considered as constitutive of contemporary identities and notions of belonging and entitlement” (p. 10).

Due to the shortcomings the concepts of race and ethnicity have had in defining, representing and understanding Latinas/os Hispanic people, both authors stress the role of Ethnorace in order to fully grasp the visual representations and consumption of browned bodies. In her influential work “Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?” philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff evidences how the categorization of “Race” has never applied to the group deemed Latina/o. Alcoff states that race, as it has historically functioned in the US, denotes “homogeneity, easily visible identifying features, and biological heredity” (2000, 24). These characteristics, however, cannot simply be added on to Latina/os on account of the nuances in both cultural and biological traits. Consequently, she calls into question those that reject “race” and its effects and have instead adopted the notion of ethnicity as a viable cultural marker by which to assess and understand Latina/os.

To better grasp the function and logics behind Hispanic Marketing within a global age, this study frames ethnorace as a useful tool by which to understand the *browning of the sporting gaze*. The browning of the sporting world invokes broader conversations about struggles towards cultural and global citizenship; it al-

lows fans and cultural critics alike to think through how social matrixes of ethnorace, citizenship and mobility continue to play out into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through sporting competitions, marketing and popular discourses. Consequently, future studies into the browning of sport must build from studies that have analyzed the affects and logics of regimes of containment and colorblindness. (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo, 2010; Sundstrom, 2008)

### 3. Discussion: “Celebrating Your Passion”

As a child, I would spend my weekday afternoons shooting hoops in the backyard my parents rented out on a monthly basis. Though comprised mostly of dirt and loose-gravel, that court would become center stage for countless hours of imagining “my American Dream”. Though raised in Los Angeles, I would make believe that I was part of the 1995–96 rosters of the late-Seattle Super Sonics. Alongside Payton, Kemp, Schrempf, Perkins and McMillan, was me: the 6<sup>th</sup> man: “And coming off the bench is the 1995 1<sup>st</sup> draft pick, Number 88...”

Out of the few childhood memories where my mind imagined an alternative world, there was this one that sticks out. It was 1995, and I was about 8 or 9 years old. Michael Jordan sprained his left ankle during game 5 of the ‘96 NBA finals, ultimately leading to Seattle’s second NBA championship title and my very first NBA championship ring. My participation in this (trans)nationally televised sporting spectacle created mass eruptions of joy through the heart of Meso-America. You see, in my mind’s eye, I would make sure the television announcers adequately acknowledged my parents’ ethnic-roots in Central America. This was important to me because I did not want to imagine a future where I did not know who or where my family was and came from. However, reflecting back, I did not yet know that understanding the present “let alone using the past to inform the future” would be so difficult.

In their recent co-authored monograph Aldama and González (2014) connect with this childhood memory of mine, with their *conversación de sobremesa*—an after dinner in-depth conversation. They focus on the (in)visible histories of Latino players within the National Football League (NFL) and contend that by looking into the histories and experiences of Chicano and Latino athletes, new readings into the intersections between ethnicity, race, class, family, capitalism and sport emerge. Their terming of the “Brown Color Line” is demonstrated to be a significant historical and contemporary marker due to the “unequal access to education and racial segregation” this racial line has regulated to *browned* populations. Furthermore, Aldama and González (2014) argue:

Historically, Latinos have constantly been told they

don't belong, despite the thousands upon thousands of Latinos who can trace their ancestry in this land far before there was a United States of America, so that's nothing new. It has happened and will continue to happen the more we break ground in areas people never expected to see us...A little Latino boy growing up in west Texas may have a hard time believing he can be John Elway, but he might believe he can be Jim Plunkett. Those sorts of thing really do matter. (p. 77)

The authors push readers to consider what it meant for Chicano quarterbacks like Jim Plunkett, Tom Flores and Joe Kapp to break through the NFL brown color line in order to better understand the ways Latinos have been regulated to certain social roles as both athletes and a people. Indeed, by peering into the role of brownness in American sport, new conversations about social inclusion and issues of access and equity can be better obtained for peoples and communities that don't strictly adhere to the common sense notion of sports as mere entertainment.

### 3.1. *Noche de Apertura—Posting Op: New York, NY, Oct. 2009*

Similar to marketing events occurring in/through the NFL (Harrison & Mukul, 2013), National Basketball Association (NBA) expanded its multicultural branding with a "new marketing campaign" geared to the growing U.S. Hispanic market. This rebranding effort, dubbed *éne-bé-a* (read NBA in Spanish) is a "360-degree campaign [that] will include television, radio and online advertising, a Web site, special events, grassroots programs and unique consumer products" (NBA, 2009, October 19). The brainchild of Saskia Sorrosa, Vice President of multicultural/targeted marketing, the *éne-bé-a* is the medium by which the representation of Latinas/os takes place in modern day American basketball.

This section argues that *Noche Latina* is a colorblind spectacle, whereby the celebration of differences serves as substitute to the materialist grounded differences based on ethnoracial lived realities. "A colorblind diversity understanding of the social world is based on the premise that it is sufficient to embrace cultural differences among various racial and ethnic groups without acknowledging disparities among these groups in power, status, wealth, and access." (Herring & Henderson, 2011, p. 632) As such, *Noche Latina* marketing campaigns are conceptualized as "contested terrain" (Beamon & Messer, 2014, p. 7) on account of its emergence and consumption within the realms of sport. As such, I argue *Noche Latina* marketing campaigns are a fruitful space where identity politics and power relations can be mapped out to contextualize how media and politics operate in tandem.

Sociologist William Robinson (2011) describes the

entrance of a Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC): "The TCC is a class group grounded in global markets and circuits of accumulation...There are of course still local and national capitalists, and there will be for a long time to come. But they must "de-localize" and link to transnational capital if they are to survive" (p. 355). The productions of a TCC, alongside the processes of global capitalism, have serious implications for consumers, entrepreneurs, and workers revolving around the sporting world as well. In the case of Saskia Sorrosa, leading Hispanic media distributors have projected her as "The Trendsetter" (Hispanic Executive, 2012) and as a "Latina of Influence" for her "brand strategy, brand positioning, content development, event promotion and advertising efforts targeted to the U.S. Hispanic, African-American, Youth and Female segments" (Sandoval, 2013). Sorrosa, as a key stakeholder and visionary in the dissemination of NBA as global entertainment, has determined the transnational Hispanic imaginary through her ability to bank off of a diverse group of cultures and brand it as a homogenous celebration. Similar to Robinson's TCC, Andrews and Silk (2005) write:

Rather than using uniform and invariant global marketing and advertising initiatives that attempted to negate entrenched national cultural boundaries (something tried and failed by many in the fledging stages of the transnational era), transnational [elites] seek increasingly to represent national cultures in a manner designed to engage the nationalist sensibilities of local consumers. In this scenario, the locus of control in influencing the manner in which the nation and national identity are represented becomes exteriorized through, and internalized within, the promotional strategies of transnational corporations. (p. 176)

As sport sociologists continue to elucidate, the recent synergy between sports, media, culture and capital will continue to reveal the role that transnational corporations engage local and nationalist particularities and warp it onto a singular global imaginary. The induction of *éne-bé-a* and *Noche Latina* as the "promotional strategies" of a transnationalist NBA consequently produces a transnational Latina/o image historically founded along uneven power relationships.

### 3.2. *Noche Dos—D-E-F-E-N-S-E: Phoenix, AZ, May 2010*

Amidst the 2010 passing of Arizona Senate Bill 1070—a state policy that sought to provide the CCA (Corrections Corporation of America) with an influx of browned (un)documented bodies (NPR, 2010, November 9), Arizona's Phoenix Suns were going into game two of the Western conference finals against the Texas rival the San Antonio Spurs. On this particular occasion, the

viewing of basketball as purely entertainment crashed with the surrounding tension brought on by SB 1070. This moment pushed NBA players, coaches and franchise owners alike to grapple with the interrelationship between sport and politics. The Phoenix Suns donned code-switched jerseys for the night's game. According to franchise owner Robert Sarver, the decision to wear the "Los Suns" jersey came from the players themselves. In an interview with ESPN, then-Sun point guard Steve Nash had this to say:

I'm against it. I think this is a bill that really damages our civil liberties. I think it opens up for the potential of racial profiling, racism. I think it sets a bad precedent to set for our young people. I think it represents our state poorly in the eyes of the nation and the world. And I think we have a lot of great attributes here and I think its something we can do without and it hopefully it will change a lot in the coming weeks.(Democracy Now!, 2010, May 6).

Intended as an effort to show solidarity with the Latino community, the Suns' attempt to politicize the jerseys alongside SB 1070 is a prime example of the kind of agency one finds by following the browned color line. However, like any conversation about immigration, race and human rights usually leads to, the Suns' decision to protest the Arizona state government draconian immigration bill was ultimately met with mixed emotions from fans, coaches and team owners everywhere. Most notably from legendary head coach and longtime icon of the NBA, Phil Jackson.

In an early May 2010 pregame news conference, then Lakers head coach Phil Jackson responded to ESPN.com news correspondent J.A. Andade's who inquired into the "Zen master's" take on the possibilities between sport and politics: "Am I crazy, or am I the only one that heard when the legislators said that 'we just took United States immigration law and adapted it to our state'?" Jackson continued on by critiquing Sarver's franchise and the NBA players who decided to vocally express and get involved into politics: "I don't think teams should get involved in the *political stuff* [emphasis added]. I think this one is still kind of coming out to balance as to how it is going to [be] favorably looked upon by...the public" (Amato, 2010, May 17). In response to anti-immigrant rhetoric and notions of containing "brownness", LA community activists and sports fans alike rallied and protested the Phoenix Suns and Los Angeles Lakers playoff game in mid May 2010. "We were deeply disappointed because we love the Lakers. And we're here to denounce Phil Jackson's comments and his support for Arizona and we want to him to stand with the fans" said Jason Zepeda, a Lakers fan and political organizer for the protest. What this succeeding event in 2010 illustrates are the new conversations that arise when Latinos become

a driving force in the way sporting institutions appeal to fans and consumers alike (Jensen, 2014).

However, what gets lost in both Nash's and Jackson's discourse is the central truth that *everything* about sport is political because everything about the sporting body is political. For example, while Nash and the wearing of "Los Suns" was mobilized in an effort to visually critique Arizona state immigration law and the embedded antiquated notion of citizenship as white-America, it was ultimately done so under an individualist framework—or, *buy this jersey and you too can resist racial profiling*—commodity racism. In other words, while the Suns deserve praise for their desire to spread advocacy for Brown (Hispanic) people in the US, it is crucial to note that it is simultaneously done through shortcomings of institutionalized multiculturalism. As Dávila (2008) reminds us, "[nobody] is shielded from racism in the United States by identifying as 'white' if one is not visually and culturally recognized in this manner" (p. 17). By conceptualizing this mid-2010 moment in NBA history as illustrative of the "browning of the sporting gaze", we can better assess the limitations of the NBA's consequent agenda toward social inclusion via the NBA's diversity outreach programs.

Upon contextualizing this moment within contemporary discourses about sport and social inclusion, it becomes noteworthy to inquire that while a transnational corporation seeks to increase its Hispanic consumer fan-base it simultaneously has relatively nothing to say towards how this potential consumer enclave interfaces with/in larger systems of discipline and control. (i.e., crimmigration, ethno-racial profiling, and/or the prison-industrial-complex) As anti-SB 1070 grassroots advocacy group Alto Arizona powerfully asserted: "A coach that doesn't support the community doesn't have the community's support" (quoted in Dave Zirin "Boycott Phil Jackson: Why Lakers Fans should root for Los Suns"). Ultimately, the social tensions that have arisen from SB 1070 alongside the NBA have opened up a moment whereby the NBA—as an organization and global institution—can align itself with a more progressive politics that stands by critical social inclusion. Furthermore, Dávila (2008) reminds us Latinos are simultaneously positioned in the US media as both friend *and* foe. As critical consumers and fans of the game, Latinas/os should ponder, and imagine the potentiality of the rising Latina/o presence in the NBA and other professional sports. As I'll conclude below, it is crucial to hold the NBA accountable for the decisions it takes (or does not take); I tie in together already discussed concepts of ethnorace and Latinidad and attach it to the marvel of the sport-media complex in order to better comprehend the implications that a social inclusion via the contemporary framework of individualism and consumption has for a transnational public audience.

### 3.3. Noche Tres—“Es Tu Noche”: Miami, FL, March 2013

In an éné-bé-a affiliated promo, journalist Lorena Baez (LB) walks around American Airlines Arena, home to the Miami Heat. For 2013, “Yo soy Latino de corazon” was the promotional taglines constantly reverberated in this 4 minute 17 second video. Lorena Baez, a light-browened skinned Latina, introduces the short promo alongside a small group of musicians carrying wind instruments commonly used in *Timba*—Cuban salsa. Baez begins by stating: “Definitely, this night has a different flavor. Tonight, we pay homage to the prominent Latino basketball players and give a strong acknowledgement to their home culture. So tonight let’s enjoy Noche Latina” [translated by author]. The promotional video continues by Baez asking Miami Heat fans what “Noche Latina” signifies to them. While she asks a couple of fans to explore the cultural meaning of having a Latin-influenced heritage night, ultimately, it is an encounter with a phenotypically White Male (WM), aged 18–34, that reveals the shortcomings of social inclusion via the NBA:

**WM:** So, I’m from South Florida. But I don’t speak Spanish, but I support Hispanic peoples.

**LB:** You are Latin from your heart, right?

**WM:** Yes, Latin from my heart.

(NBA, 2013, March 26)

In a context where the celebrating of brownness automatically erases structural and cultural discrimination, the above conversation reveals the limitations of the NBA’s Noche Latina marketing campaigns. In other words, it is important to understand the differences between the *intent* of Noche Latina in contrast to its *reception*. Does buying a jersey with “Los” or “El” demonstrate cultural empowerment or is it another application of commodity activism? In a *New York Times* NBA Blog piece, Stuart Miller (2013, March 15) writes: “The league did extensive market research to learn what fans wanted and said it got a much stronger response to the jersey names it chose than a true translation. The league also expanded the event to include culturally relevant music and food”. Similarly, in another 2013 news article on the *Huffington Post* titled “NBA Defines Latinos in the U.S. with “Noche Latina” Campaign”, NBA promotional gimmicks for the 2013 season are described: “For this year, a campaign featuring Latino pride was created, in which a man speaking in English explains that although he is proud to be a Latino, likes Spanish music, and fútbol, he also feels very American, and enjoys basketball.” However, this kind of representation via multicultural branding and commodity culture (code-switched jerseys, cultural nights, television promos) has generated consistent criticism in social media. For example, ThinkPro-

gress.org article “How the NBA’s “Noche Latina” Jerseys Fall Short of Actual Latino Outreach”; or an online petition calling the NBA’s Noche Latina to stop; as well as a comical headline by *The Onion* “NBA Honors Latino Community by Using Spanish Word for ‘The’ on Jerseys.”

Before wrapping up the éné-bé-a promo for “El Heat’s 2013 Noche Latina”, Lorena Baez joins Miami Heat basketball players Norris Cole, Mario Chalmers, Chris Andersen, and Mike Miller in their locker room. Asking what the purpose of Noche Latina is, Miller responds: “Obviously, we have a lot of Latin fans. It’s a way for us to kind of thanking them for being part of Noche Latino [*sic*]. So it’s a lot of fun for us to be a part of this.” Noche Latina marketing campaigns celebrates Latina/o inclusion via a politics of scratch-the-surface multiculturalism and buying individual accessories. As I stated earlier, I used to imagine myself making it into the NBA and playing for a team that I dearly admired. Growing up, I didn’t really read into issues or histories of marginalization namely because the U.S. status quo doesn’t necessitate critically youth thinkers. However, this lack of awareness on my part did not diminish the fact that my conception of reality was being very much informed by the racial, gendered, and sexualized performativities televised and channeled via the NBA:

[S]porting discourses, practices, and experiences often serve as a juncture for particular dominant groups to further (re) define the parameters of the “sanctioned” identity, and are often mobilized and appropriated with regard to the organization and discipline of daily life, in the shaping and “education” of citizens, and in the service of particular corporate-political agendas. (Silk, 2002, p. 6)

As demonstrated with the Phoenix Suns politicization of “Los Suns”, Noche Latina does provide opportunities to challenge sport fans and the general public alike on issues about citizenship, immigration and social inclusivity. However, given the social context by which marginalized identities are (re) fashioned along capitalist incentives, the dissemination of a homogenous Hispanic identity further erases the complexities and nuances of Latina/o Latin American people, histories and cultures.

In other words, sport instructs, defines, and shapes our social relations because of its ability to disguise racial, gendered and classed agendas through the notion of “it’s just a game”. This becomes evident in the ways Noche Latina is projected among fans, players and owners alike. Fans and popular media accept an individualist celebration of “Hispanics” because it substitutes for a critical grappling with how the same celebrated community is being contained, excluded and marginalized in other sectors of U.S. society. Indeed, what does not get acknowledged in popular media, unfortunately, are the ways Noche Latina simultaneously commodifies and contains browned histories and



Latinidad consciousness.

As of the writing of this essay, the Lorena Baez éné-bé-a promo piece had received a little over 60,000 views. Additionally, the video clip generated around 500 comments. A number of these comments highlight the notion of “symbolic colonization” as explained by Molina-Guzmán (2010). Symbolic colonization is a theoretical concept helpful in distinguishing the means by which Latinidad is produced, consumed and disregarded. “What is of interest in my discussion of symbolic colonization is the ways in which media practices reproduce dominant norms, values, beliefs, and public understandings about Latinidad as gendered, racialized, foreign, exotic, and consumable” (p. 9). For example, user Mike Jones wrote: “That’s by far the best thing about Latinos, the b\*\*\*\*\*s”. This is also graphically exemplified via YouTube user Carl Landry who commented: “When he [sic] was interviewing birdman it was like an introduction to a porn scene hahaha at 3:20”. Additionally, a Google image search with the key words “Noche Latina NBA” reveals three common occurrences: video games, jerseys, and the Latina cheerleader/dancer. It is in these public popular comments and images that I believe the structural problematics of social inclusion via current NBA outreach policies is best highlighted. As YouTube user DCjoker2 subtly inquires:

I wonder why the nba didn’t bother putting up subtitles for this video, i speak spanish so i understand this, but whats the point of the video if the main audience for this is supposed to be non latinos. It was meant for people to learn about latin culture and they can’t even understand what she is saying. [sic]

Noche Latina furthers the commodification and containment of the Latina body because like Molina-Guzmán clarifies, symbolic colonization always constructs Latinidad as a consumable commodity. The NBA, with its Noche Latina marketing campaign, must be scrutinized and held accountable for its reinforcement of the typical Latina stereotype: hot blooded, innately good dancers, thick accent and hyper-sexualized.

In constructing this argument about the ways Noche Latina serves as a racialized/gendered/sexualized project informed along class lines, it becomes necessary to note that Latina/o agency is equally at play in this dialectical relationship. In their discussion about the way the media constructs the Latino football player, Aldama and González (2014) fittingly assert that at the end of the day Latinas/os are “self agents” in the ways the media constructs, manipulates, reports and narrates on/about Latinas/os (p. 84). By “teaching” a basketball player to say “Me gustan las Mujeres Latinas” (I Love Latin Women), Baez justifies and perpetuates to a transnational global audience much of the historically informed cultural tropes geared towards

Latinos and Latinas. The fact that these YouTube viewers did not care as to what Baez was *saying*, but rather were only interested in how her body was *shaking*, produces a public violence upon women of color. Noche Latina, as derivative of the hyper-masculine hetero-normative US culture, affirms this hyper-sense of hetero-masculinity, where like the basketball, Latinas become props on and off the court. In sum, it is not what Noche Latina says, but rather what it does not say, and under what interests, that should be on the minds of fans, players, coaches and marketers alike. I conclude this essay by offering up alternative ideas that might better position the Noche Latina campaign as truly cognizant and socially inclusive to Latina/o Hispanic consumer base.

#### 4. Conclusions: After Noche Latina

In his *Sports Illustrated* article “Cal’s Jorge Gutierrez shaped by life-changing voyage from Mexico”, journalist Jordan Conn (2011, January 27) narrates a story unheard of in Noche Latina—so far. Gutierrez, who signed a one-year contract with the Brooklyn Nets early 2014, became the fourth Mexican-national athlete to *make it* to the NBA. Gutierrez’s inception into the NBA provides ample possibility towards viewing professional basketball naturally inclined towards the social inclusion of Latina/o communities. Noche Latina, as it has been framed in the previous years, is representative to Eurocentric notions of identity and culture, evident through Latin American basketball players like San Antonio Spurs Manu Ginobili (Argentina); retired player turned D-league coach Eduardo Najera (Mexico); and Minnesota Timberwolves Rick Rubio (Spain). By advertising players like Ginobili as emblematic of Latina/o Hispanic peoples and experiences, locally specific histories of ethnorace, gender, class, and sexuality are potentially erased from the dominant gaze. By privileging a whitened image of the Hispanic, Noche Latina marketing campaigns function to affirm hegemonic racial (White), sexual (Male Gaze), and classed (Transnational Capitalist Class) ideologies and tropes. However, like Oboler, Dávila and Alcoff remind us, there is not a “one-size fits all” when it comes to this ethnoracial population. Gutierrez’s narrative is instructive because his reception to the NBA becomes indicative of how “brown-bodies” interface U.S. society and policies. Gutierrez, at the age of 15, took it upon himself to cross over *la frontera* (the border) in order to pursue his American Dream. Fortunately, Gutierrez’s cultural capital as a gifted basketball player allowed him access to a college degree and now a career as a professional athlete. It remains to be seen if Gutierrez’s browned-sporting gaze will embody Noche Latina media reels.

To close this essay, I ask: If the NBA is truly invested in representing it’s Latina/o Hispanic consumer base, then why not go the extra step and publically support

Latinas/os political and economic interests? For example, the NBA could collect revenue from the month-long sales of code-switched jerseys and/or ticket sales and funnel those proceeds to state-sponsored scholarship opportunities for undocumented students, such as California's AB 540 or Washington State's HB 1079. Similarly, the NBA could sponsor political educational promos providing a wider audience during the month of March more discussion into issues of continued importance for the Latina/o population. Or maybe, and on account of the fact that Jorge Gutierrez benefited from policies like the DREAM Act, perhaps the NBA can go on record to promote this crucial bill that seeks to provide more (un)documented Latinas/os and immigrants a fighting opportunity to contribute and participate in US society. Each one of these resolutions, on an individual or collective scale, would effectively demonstrate to a global audience that the "NBA's Cares" about creating a socially inclusive society for those affected by the processes of brownness in US society.

In this essay, I borrowed from Sport Studies and Latina/o Culture Studies in order to contextualize some of the social tensions within the brief tenure of the *éne-bé-a*. I argued that Noche Latina goes beyond entertainment and spectacle, and very much informs the cultural politics of ethnorace, Latinidad, and transnational capital. In other words, the National Basketball Association's Noche Latina Marketing Campaign serves as a hegemonic tool that justifies and perpetuates a colonial imaginary to a transnational public audience. Indeed, though Noche Latina will remain a cultural phenomenon that (re) inscribes classed, racial and gendered stereotypical norms, it is important to emphasize the role that agency plays in such conversations about media representation. Latin Americans, Latinas/os and Hispanics indeed have a powerful culture worthy of praise and celebration. Unfortunately, without more scrutiny coming from the fans, players, coaches, and marketers themselves invested in discussing the ways that the NBA in specific, but all professional sport in general, *can* become institutional beacons for political progress and social justice, then critical diversity and (Real) social inclusion for one of the fastest growing communities and cultures in the US will continue to be simply marketed to the world as making *El-Team-O*.

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